

Administration of Barack Obama, 2012

Remarks Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt of Denmark

February 24, 2012

President Obama. Well, I want to welcome Prime Minister Thorning-Schmidt to the White House and to the Oval Office. This is the first time that we've had a chance to meet, but obviously, we've been very impressed with the first 5 months of her Prime Ministership. I shared with her how much Michelle and I appreciated the extraordinary hospitality that was shown to Michelle and I when I visited Copenhagen in the past. And I also wanted to just say how much we appreciate the great alliance and partnership that we have with the Danish people on a whole range of international issues.

Obviously, most recently, the operations in Libya could not have been as effective had it not been for the precision and the excellence of the Danish armed forces and their pilots. But that's fairly typical of the way that Danes have punched above their weight in international affairs.

In Afghanistan, I thanked the Prime Minister for the extraordinary contributions of Danish troops in the Helmand area. They operate without caveat, have taken significant casualties, for which obviously all of us extend our condolences to the families that have been affected. But because of the outstanding work that's been done by Danish soldiers in Afghanistan, we're seeing great progress in the areas where they operate.

We had a chance to talk about the economy. We—as we were exchanging notes, it turns out that, like folks here in the United States, everybody in Denmark wants to talk about the economy all the time and jobs and growth. And we agreed that there has been some progress in resolving the sovereign debt issues, that there's been some progress with respect to the agreements between the EU and the IMF and Greece, the new Government in Italy, new Governments in Spain and Portugal are all making some significant progress, but that there's a lot more work to do. And we will be consulting closely with Denmark.

And we exchanged ideas on how we can ensure not only economic stability in Europe, but also growth in Europe, because if Europe is growing, then that benefits the U.S. economy as well. And we've emphasized, are there additional ways that we can encourage trade and reduce economic frictions between the two sides of the transatlantic relationship.

In preparation for our meeting in Chicago, at NATO, in my hometown, we talked about the transition that was already agreed to in Lisbon, when it comes to putting Afghans in the lead in security over the next several years. And we are going to be consulting closely with not only Denmark, but our other allies in making sure that that is a smooth transition and one that is sustainable, where we continue to help the Afghan Government to support its own sovereignty and to effectively control its borders.

We also discussed the extraordinary counterterrorism cooperation that's taking place between our two countries. And I thanked the Prime Minister for the excellent work that her intelligence team has done. We are in constant communication on a whole host of issues. The Danes are very much one of the leaders when it comes to counterterrorism and are obviously familiar with the significant threats that are posed by terrorism. So we appreciated that very much.

And we had a chance to talk about a wide range of international issues, including the situation in Syria. And I have to say that all of us who've been seeing the terrible pictures coming out of Syria and Homs recently recognize it is absolutely imperative for the international community to rally and send a clear message to President Asad that it is time for a transition, it is time for that regime to move on, and it is time to stop the killing of Syrian citizens by their own Government.

And I'm encouraged by the international unity that we are developing, the meeting that took place in Tunisia that Secretary Clinton had attended. And we are going to continue to keep the pressure up and look for every tool available to prevent the slaughter of innocents in Syria. And this is an area where I think the Prime Minister and I deeply agree. It's important that we not be bystanders during these extraordinary events.

At the same time, there are other threats in the region, including the situation in Iran. And I thanked the Prime Minister and the Danish Government for their leadership role in applying the toughest sanctions we've ever seen coming out of the EU. Difficult sanctions to apply, but we both agreed that we're making progress and they are working in sending a message to Iran that it needs to take a different path if it wants to rejoin the international community and that there is an expectation on the part of the world that they abide by their international obligations when it comes to their nuclear program.

So the final thing we talked about was the fact that we both have two daughters. *[Laughter]* They're roughly the same ages. We traded notes. The Prime Minister's daughters are slightly older than Malia and Sasha. She assures me that they continue to behave themselves, even well into their teenage years. So I'm encouraged by that report. *[Laughter]*

Prime Minister Thorning-Schmidt. Very good.

President Obama. And I thank you very much. I hope that you have a wonderful stay while you're here, and we look forward to working with you again in the near future.

Prime Minister Thorning-Schmidt. Thank you, Mr. President. And thank you so much for your kind words. I mean, the Danish people have a very strong sense of closeness to the United States. We always have had that sense. We have close economic, political ties with each other. But not only that, we exchange—we have exchanged tourism, students, ideas, culture. But perhaps most important of all, we have—we share common values. And I think in a turbulent time, this is very, very important.

So basically, the friendship and the alliance between our two countries is in a very good shape right now. And I thank you for that.

As you said, we discussed the economic situation. Denmark holds the Presidency of the EU right now, and we talk about the debt situation most of the time in Europe. I conveyed the message to the President that I am convinced that we will see our self through this crisis. We have now put some very important measures in place. We have fiscal consultation, we have reforms, and we have a focus on growth and jobs right now.

In doing that, in this endeavor, I think a closer transatlantic relationship would be important. We are dependent on each other, and we should have closer trade with each other, and I think that would be part of creating a sustainable growth in our countries.

As you were saying, Mr. President, we also have close ties in terms of security. It is clear—it has been for a long time—that Danish soldiers are serving alongside American soldiers in Afghanistan, and I used the opportunity today to thank you and the American people for the

great effort you have put in Afghanistan. It is greatly appreciated worldwide. And I know that the Danish people really appreciate the global leadership that you and your people have taken also in that context.

I look forward, of course, to coming back to the States, to your hometown, Chicago, to participate in the NATO summit. What we will be discussing there is Afghanistan, of course. One of the major issues there is to transition to the next phase in Afghanistan, and where—what we want to see is the Afghans taking responsibility for their own security. And we are, in Europe, with the—under Danish leadership, trying to gather donors in this—in securing that the Afghans are capable of taking over their own security.

We have some great examples of our alliance. We have worked together, again, in Libya, where we made sure that we—that Libya came out on a path of democracy. And I think, again, the Americans showed leadership in that context.

Another area that we discussed, as you've said, was Syria, which is quite the opposite situation. It is horrendous what we see in Syria right now. But I think it is also very, very true that we have worked together in that area. We must continue that endeavor, and just today we have seen that, under the leadership of the League of Arab States, there has been a step forward in trying to put pressure on Syria, which is very, very important. The same, of course, goes for Iran.

Another area in security where we work together is in terms of piracy, and I used the opportunity of thanking sincerely the President for the courageous operation that led to the freeing of two aid workers that worked for the Danish Refugee Council. They are now safe because of the Americans. Thank you for that.

So basically, our security—our cooperation in terms of security are very great indeed.

I will finish here just by saying that I think our meeting here today has confirmed the friendship and the alliance between our two countries. We—there's a lot we can do that—you're always welcome to come to Denmark—and I think it is very, very important that we have these kind of meetings to renew the friendship, and this is what we've done today.

Thank you.

President Obama. Okay. Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:41 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Johanna and Camilla Kinnock, daughters of Prime Minister Thorning-Schmidt. Prime Minister Thorning-Schmidt referred to Jessica Buchanan of the United States, and Poul Hagen Thisted of Denmark, who were rescued in a Navy SEAL operation on January 24, after being held hostage by Somali pirates in Galkayo, Somalia, since October 25, 2011.

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